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Open Letter from Master Sheng-yen

Dear Reader:

This is my first open letter to you, and it marks the 100th issue of the Ch'an Newsletter. I hope you will join me in the celebration of this important milestone.

We published the first issue in November 1979. At that time I was in New York in a small one-story building with one disciple, Paul Kennedy. We had some difficulty in coming up with the \$400 rent. Nevertheless, we started our publications as soon as we could, because we wanted others to benefit from authentic Ch'an teaching and we wanted to spread Buddhadharma.

The Ch'an Newsletter began as a monthly publication, but when we began our quarterly, Ch'an Magazine, we chose not to issue the Newsletter when the Magazine came out. Thus the Newsletter is published eight times a year. However, we depend on volunteers to edit and produce this work, so on occasion circumstances have forced us to miss an issue or two.

We've had a number of different editors and staff working on the Newsletter. They have all been sincere and devoted participants in our work, and due to their efforts the publication has grown from an informal two-page bulletin to a fully-composed eight-page journal. Not long ago, we published a hard-bound compilation of the first 78 issues. During the time of these issues, Harry Miller and Trish Ing spent the most time and effort. On behalf of all of our readers, I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for all of their hard work.

The Ch'an Newsletter primarily consists of my lectures. Since my English is not adequate for writing or giving lectures, I must rely on my disciples to translate for me. For this reason an issue of the Ch'an Newsletter must pass through many steps before it reaches you: When I lecture in Chinese, there is a simultaneous English translation which is recorded. That tape is transcribed, often to a handwritten manuscript, which is in turn edited, typeset, printed, and finally mailed to you. All this hard work is the product of a great deal of energy and enthusiasm.

We sometimes receive letters from our readers expressing their views on what we have written. Sometimes the responses are many, sometimes few. Other periodicals often seek our permission in reprinting

articles from the Newsletter. As long as they acknowledge the source we are happy to give our permission. Our goal is to spread Buddhadharma, so we are proud to be of service in any way we can in order to transmit Ch'an.

Finally, not only do I want to thank all of you for the support you have shown the Ch'an Newsletter and accordingly offer you my sincerest blessings, but most importantly, I want you to know that your input and suggestions are highly valued. Let the Ch'an Newsletter be your companion and let us grow together. Our path will be long and wide.

Shih-fu Sheng-yen
January 1994

Correction:

In last issue of the Ch'an Newsletter we mistakenly stated that the translator was L. C. Cleary. As shown below, the translator is J. C. Cleary.

Instructions for the Seven-day Meditation Retreat

**Morning and Noon Talks by Master Sheng-yen
December 26 to December 31, 1992**

Translated by J. C. Cleary

The Fourth Day

Putting Aside the Self

The concept of "self" can have a large or small scope. It includes the small self of the individual ego, and it also includes the total being, the whole being, the so-called Great Self of the absolute truth and God. Ch'an practitioners must put all of this aside. It is relatively easy to understand this in theory, but to experience it fully is difficult. That is why we use various meditation methods. For now I will just mention two of them.

(1) Observing the breath.

This method can make us realize that our lives only exist from breath to breath. Therefore selfish clinging exists only in the continuity of one thought following upon another. When we stop breathing, our lives are over. When our thoughts dissolve away, there is no basis for clinging or attachment. Through the method of counting breaths, we can directly experience the fact that what we think of as the existence of the self is nothing more than a false state.

But when the breathing stops and life ends, is this the realm of selfless liberation appearing? No. As long as clinging or attachment of the self are still there, even if we enter into the four formless states of samsdhi, the self will still exist. Conversely, when

life continues with no clinging or attachment, this is selflessness, this is liberation. Therefore, we must take advantage of this life to practice. By cultivating the practice of meditation, we discover that what we believe to be our own life is false. We will then be able to realize that the self is non-existent.

(2) Shame and Repentance

Arrogance, self-abasement, suspicion, jealousy, hatred, anger, and so on—these are all the self. Besides using Ch'an methods to transform such emotions, we also must use methods of shame and repentance to help us. If Ch'an practitioners do not cultivate both shame and repentance, it is easy to overestimate oneself and accept little attainment as sufficient, or underestimate oneself and practice many years without believing one has made progress. If we feel shame at not practicing harder, we will be prompted to make energetic progress on the Path, and if we cultivate repentance, we will persevere diligently through all sufferings. Shame and repentance enable us to cultivate the six paramitas, which include giving charity, upholding precepts, performing prostrations, making offerings, reciting the scriptures, and cultivating concentration.

There are many methods that will enable us to put aside the self. Thus it is said: there are eighty-four thousand Dharma gates, and each one leads to the great citadel of nirvana. Ch'an practices such as counting breaths, accompanied by contemplation of shame and repentance, generate an aspiration towards enlightenment, and methods such as *hua-tou* or *kung-an* practice and silent illumination serve as golden keys.

Making Offerings

Before each meal, we recite this verse: "We make offerings to the Buddha, we make offerings to the Dharma, we make offerings to the Sangha, we make offerings to all sentient beings." This is the cultiva-

tion of practice, and one could also say that this is the heart of Mahayana Buddhism. We make offerings to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—the Three Jewels—because we feel a debt of gratitude to them; we repay this debt by making offerings to all sentient beings so they may be delivered. After Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha have accepted the offerings, they use this power to help even more people. This amounts to taking our own possessions and committing them to the benefit of all sentient beings. After this, we transfer the merit from our offerings to the Three Jewels and to all sentient beings—all that is left is selfless wisdom and everywhere-equal compassion. Simply put, we first offer material goods and then transfer the merit of that offering to others. This spiritual medicine dilutes egotism and dissolves away the false self.

You have all paid for this retreat, but this fee does not buy the teacher's time, rent space, or pay for provisions. This material wealth is a pure donation to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. It is merit that you create. I, too, feel a debt of gratitude and I try to repay it. I offer it to all of you, so that you may repay the benevolence of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. At the same time, I thank you all for coming and giving me the opportunity to make this offering.

When we finish eating, we recite: "The meal is over, and we wish that all sentient beings will accomplish whatever they endeavor, and fulfill all Buddhadharma." We express the hope that all sentient beings will practice the giving of offerings and master Buddhist teachings, so they will surely become Buddhas in the future. We pray that all sentient beings become Buddhas, expressing the fact that we do not practice solely for our own advantage. And so, when you begin to practice, you must tame and refine yourselves. You must move from the initial stage of seeking to that of not seeking, and finally to the cultivation of offerings on the broadest scale.

The Fifth Day

This retreat will soon reach its end. This is the fifth day. By the day after tomorrow, it will be completed. Time certainly passes quickly!

For those who practice Ch'an, however, time can be long or short. If you really know how to meditate, then even in an instant, you can overturn the cosmos, shatter heaven and earth, and suddenly see "ten thousand miles without a cloud, unstained by a single atom of dust." The *Surangama Sutra* calls this the sudden cessation of the crazy mind." Ch'an calls it "illuminating the mind and seeing its true nature." If you do not know how to meditate, no matter how hard or how long you try, you will be hard pressed to find your own nostrils.

Not Letting the Various Poisons Enter

In Po-shan's "Words of Warning for Studying Ch'an," there is mention of "the various poisons entering the mind"—disturbances caused by false thoughts.

One must pass through three stages to counter these poisons:

1. When you use your method, no poisons enter your mind—false thoughts have been driven off by the method, and for the time being the poisons do not penetrate.
2. Just before the enlightened state arises, the poisons are cut off and false thoughts do not arise.
3. Once complete great enlightenment is achieved, the crazy chaotic mind comes to a stop, and the poisons can no longer disturb the mind.

The Meditation Method is the Root of Life

The practical methods of Ch'an cultivation are the root of life for Ch'an practitioners. If we depart

from our meditation methods, we are in danger of losing our lives. Therefore, since ancient times, Ch'an teachers have taught people to cultivate themselves by holding fast to their *kung-an* or *hua-tou* in order to safeguard their lives. You should imagine that you are lost at sea, clinging to a life preserver—how could you let go of it? Nevertheless, when you have been working at the method for a long time, you begin to feel tired and lazy. This is the time when you must mobilize your courage, become decisive, energize the great faith within you, and renew your grasp on the life-saving meditation method—only then will you be able to survive.

When you let go of the method, you should feel a great sense of shame. Take a vow of great compassion—then you will strengthen your will power, dispel scattered thinking, and wholeheartedly practice the method.

The Initial Aspiration for Enlightenment

There are numerous descriptions of the mind upon the initial aspiration for enlightenment: "mind of supreme enlightenment," "the initial mind for enlightenment," "the initial aspiration for enlightenment" and "the new aspiration for enlightenment." This refers to the stage when you first hear Buddhist teaching, with its correct knowledge and true vision, and you are awed by the grandeur of the Path. You make a great vow to become enlightened and achieve Buddhahood. The first tender sprouts of enlightenment come forth in your mind, and you begin to forge ahead on the Path to becoming a Buddha. This is only a beginning, but it is the source of the motivation towards enlightenment.

In Volume 59 of the Chin dynasty translation of the *Flower Ornament Scripture*, it states that: "The aspiration for enlightenment is the seed of all enlightened states, the seed of all the Buddhas, because it can give birth to all the phenomena of enlightenment, to all Buddhadharma."

In Volume 41 of the *Treatise of the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, it states that: "When bodhisattvas first develop the aspiration for enlightenment, and form a causal connection with the Supreme Path, and vow 'I must become a Buddha'—this is called the mind for enlightenment." In Volume 93 it says: "For those at the stage of the initial aspiration for enlightenment, the Buddhas explain that all phenomena are contrived. For those who have been studying for a long time and have become attached to good things, they say that all phenomena are empty and utterly nonexistent."

A very detailed explanation of the initial aspiration for enlightenment can be found in the chapter "Generating the Mind for Enlightenment" in Volume One of the *Scripture on the Stages and Practices of Bodhisattvas*. It says: "When bodhisattvas first generate the mind for enlightenment, this is the start of all right vows." "When bodhisattvas first generate the mind for enlightenment, this is what they say: 'I must find supreme enlightenment, and put all sentient beings at peace, and bring them to ultimate nirvana with no remainder and to the great wisdom of the ones who come from Thusness.'" "When bodhisattvas first generate the mind for enlightenment, this is called 'crossing over,' and they number among the bodhisattvas of the Great Vehicle's enlightenment." The scripture also says, "After you first generate the mind for enlightenment, you gradually attain to supreme unexcelled perfect enlightenment. Therefore, the initial aspiration for enlightenment is the basis for enlightenment. After you have generated this mentality, this mind for enlightenment, you see all sentient beings subject to measureless sufferings. The mind of compassion arises, and you want to liberate them. Therefore, the initial aspiration for enlightenment is the basis for great compassion." "When the initial mind for enlightenment is strong and solid, it opens the way for two good things to enter: first, skillful means to benefit oneself, and develop the mind of enlightenment, and second, skillful means to benefit others, and extinguish all suffering."

You have come here to take part in this seven-day retreat, and you must know that the meditation hall is called "the place where Buddhas are chosen." Once you enter the Ch'an hall, you have been chosen. You are prepared to take your place as a Buddha: not only will you illuminate mind and see its true nature, but you will suddenly awaken and become enlightened. But if you do not first generate the aspiration for enlightenment, then you will have no hope of becoming enlightened—there can be no fruit without this causal basis. Attainment would be utterly impossible.

The aim of Ch'an cultivation and realization is to awaken and enter into the ocean of wisdom of all the Buddhas, and to develop great compassion. All of you need to develop the aspiration for enlightenment. The very first aspiration for enlightenment is the most precious. Maintain it and extend it, and you are sure to become enlightened. Whenever you discover laziness, self-indulgence, inertia, craving, anger, or any such afflictions arising, whenever you discover you are manifesting evil actions physically or verbally, immediately turn to your first aspiration for enlightenment, and renew it again.

Never forget your first aspiration for enlightenment, abide in it, preserve it wherever you are—then you will not stray from the standards of cultivating the Path, and you will make continuous progress and never lose heart.

There is a certain man who always says the same thing at the end of every retreat: "I've begun again" "This time was a real beginning after all." "I've finally gotten to the beginning of the Path of supreme enlightenment." If we listen superficially, it seems he never progresses. In reality, this is something that bodhisattvas who first develop the mind for enlightenment must learn: they are always aware of the fact that they are at the stage of newly generating the aspiration for enlightenment, that they are just ordinary people who are in the process of advancing further. If they do not abandon this

fundamental view, they will not fail to renew their aspirations each day.

Riding the horse, the Mass of Fog and the Mass of Doubt

Some people have asked me this question: "I have counted my breaths to the point where I did not know whether or not I was breathing, and the count wasn't there any more. When I suddenly discover that I am still breathing, ten minutes or more have gone by, or even several dozen minutes. Is this entering samadhi? Am I still on the meditation method, or have I departed from it?"

Other people practice with *hua-tou*'s or *kung-an*'s, and throw the whole of their bodies and minds, and even the whole of the universe into their method. The result is that they feel as though they are in a mass of fog. They want to know, whether this is the mass of doubt they have been striven for. (The mass of doubt is an important stage in advanced practice.)

Depending on the circumstances, each of these situations may be either a sign of progress or the sign of a problem.

When breathing slows during breath counting to the point where your mindfulness is pure and unmixed, it's clear that there are no longer thoughts present, and, naturally, you cannot look for a number to count with. This condition is an indication that you are on your method. It is just like an expert rider on a good horse—the horse forgets you and you forget the horse so that horse and rider merge. This is a good situation, of course. I mentioned before that the essential points of the practical methods of cultivation are contemplation, illumination, and re-focus. At the time when 'horse' and 'rider' merge, the power of illumination is strong, and you don't need contemplation or re-focus, because the three of them progress together.

But it can also happen in counting your breaths that you become lazy and scattered. You become satisfied with a false sense of peace, or you're not getting enough oxygen, or you simply count until your strength ebbs. You will not feel any false thoughts at such a time. Your breathing is weak, you will be unable to count. This fog-like feeling is not samadhi—it is slipping into darkness. You're in a light sleep. Naturally, this is not proper meditation.

This is neither good nor bad. As soon as you discover yourself slipping, return to your method and you will be able to count your breaths again. Immediately begin to make gentle movement with your eyes, your head, neck, and both shoulders a few times, and then take three deep breaths, so that you can re-energize before returning to your method.

There is a clear difference between the mass of fog and the mass of doubt in *hua-tou* and *kung-an* practice.

The mass of fog means that you are confused. You don't know where you are, what to do, or what's right. You have no idea how you came to feel that way or why.

A true mass of doubt does not mean that you are uncertain. Rather, it means that you are clearly asking an extremely serious, important question, and that you wish with all your heart to find the answer. It is like bumping against a copper mountain or an iron door—you knock and no one answers, and you are at a loss at what to do next. But you truly believe that the answer lies in the *hua-tou* or *kung-an* in which you are immersed. You have cast your whole body, mind, and even the universe into your method—there is no longer a distinction between inside and outside, body and mind, guest and host. This is what we call the mass of doubt. When the mass of doubt shatters, enlightenment appears. When the mass of doubt fizzles out, it is because you are not skillfully applying your method. It is important to understand that a practice that you

are intensively developing a mass of doubt is not suitable for everyday practice.

Another situation that may develop during *hua-tou* or *kung-an* practice is a feeling that your mind is like a fly stuck in glue. All you feel is a mass of confusion. You are not really meditating—rather, you are sunk in oblivion and illusory thoughts. This is a mass of fog. When you become aware of this situation, immediately massage your neck and the muscles around your eyes with a soft gentle movement. Open your eyes wide and look at everything clearly. Then you can put your attention back on your method.

The Sixth Day

The Most Marvelous Day

Tomorrow morning the retreat will end. Therefore, today is the most promising day of the retreat. Because you have worked hard, you are clear about the concepts and methods of practice, and your body and mind have adapted. You have experienced problems such as sinking into oblivion, scattering in confusion, false thoughts, attachments, selfishness, and ignorance. You have been through shame as a result of your cultivation. You are already much improved in self-awareness, you are sincere, and you now have the power to face yourself.

We have one day left, we must value it highly. If we work well, every second is more valuable than gold or diamonds. If we do not, time passes in the blink of an eye, and even a hundred years is worthless. You have listened to the teaching, and you have caught as much as you could.

We note the following important points: Relax the body and mind, maintain the method, and not try to evaluate success or failure. The process itself is the objective; letting go is gain. We reflect on ourselves in the mirror of shame; we cleanse ourselves

with the pure water of repentance. With the mind of enlightenment we concern ourselves with sentient beings; with the mind of energetic progress we perfect ourselves. If we seek Buddhahood, we must first benefit sentient beings. Thus, the true hallmark of the Ch'an practitioner is the active presence of both compassion and wisdom.

Recognizing Ourselves

The conclusion of the retreat is also a new beginning.

Undertaking a seven-day intensive retreat is like chewing sugar cane—it gets more and more familiar, and more and more agreeable. After the seven-day retreat, it is best to rest. If your practice is long term—for three months, half a year, a full year, or three years—then there is no need to rest every seven days. For those who can not devote themselves to a long period of practice, seven days is a suitable period.

A seven-day retreat may bring some close to enlightenment. Of course, there will be many who do not awaken, but it still is very useful for anyone, in that it can correct physical, verbal, and mental conduct. It brings our defects to light, and gives us a chance to improve: externally, we correct our actions and comportment; internally, we recast our character and mental attitude. The retreat helps us to understand and transform ourselves. On the final day, even if we still have not attained a high level of Ch'an concentration, it is still very useful to investigate further into ourselves.

Refining the Mind

"Expounding the Dharma is not a matter for the mouth, and Ch'an practice is not a matter of the legs." This is a truth known to everyone in Ch'an monasteries. But many are upset if they cannot sit in the lotus position during retreat.

After six days your legs have probably adapted to sitting meditation. But in Ch'an it is more important to refine the mind than to train the legs.

In ordinary life the mind rules, so if you are confused, everything around you will be chaotic. If your mind is not at peace, then you are always subject to disturbances. Conversely, as the *Vimalakirti Sutra* says, if your mind is pure and clean, then you experience sentient beings and the whole world as pure and clean. Ordinary people hope the world will move according to their wishes. But because not everyone hopes for the same things, then no matter in what direction the world moves, not everyone will be satisfied. Consequently, while it may be necessary to improve the environment, it is even more important to improve our own minds. The most effective way to proceed is to first dispel our afflictive false thoughts and replace them with

the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha Mind, then we may work on the world. This manner of proceeding will achieve the most useful results.

Two people may react to the same thing differently. One may become angry and agitated. The other may find something that most people feel strange to be perfectly ordinary. Those who practice should take the second person as their model. True practitioners see clearly, have knowledge of how best to deal with a situation, and do not let their minds become clouded. What can be done, they do to the best of their abilities. What cannot be done, they leave for another time. Why let afflictions needlessly arise? Ch'an empowers daily life.

To all of you I wish good fortune—may everything go as you wish, and may each of you be blessed with a body and mind at peace.

NEWS ITEMS

February

5 Ven. Guo Chou went to Los Angeles and conducted a meditation class for members and friends of the Dharma Drum Mountain.

13 We celebrated the Chinese New Year, more than 250 people attended.

19 to 21 Three-day retreat, 24 participated.

UP-COMING EVENTS

April

19 to 25 Master Sheng-yen will be lecturing in Vancouver B.C. Canada

May

1 Open lecture by Master Sheng-yen, *Compassion and Wisdom*, 1:30 P.M. to 3:00 P.M.

Wednesday Ch'an Class: April 27; May 4, 11, 18, 25; June 8 and 22

Thursday Ch'an Sitting: April 28; May 5, 12, 19, 26; June 9 and 23

Seven-day Retreat: (1) May 28 to June 4
(2) June 25 to July 2